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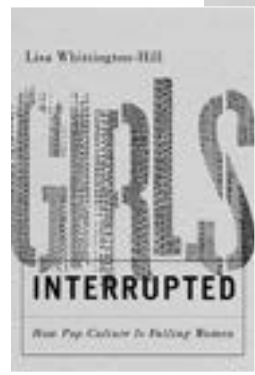
SEAN MICHAELS • CHRIS BERGERON • MOSTAFA HENAWAY • D.M. BRADFORD • QWF AWARDS

Grrrl Power

Girls Interrupted
How Pop Culture Is Failing Women
Lisa Whittington-Hill
Véhicule Press
$24.95, paper, 200pp
9781550656329



Have women ever been taken seriously by pop culture?

As a culture writer who has covered the subject extensively for the past three years, my answer is an immediate no. Pop culture has an issue with women. In a recent interview for the *New York Times*, Jann Wenner, founder of *Rolling Stone* magazine, justified the lack of women interviewed for his book because "none of them were as articulate enough on this intellectual level."

Indeed, the release of Lisa Whittington-Hill's latest book, *Girls Interrupted: How Pop Culture Is Failing Women*, comes at the right moment. In this collection of essays, Whittington-Hill explores sexism through her experienced lens as a prolific culture writer. The result is a robust and scathing book about women's treatment in a violent patriarchal system.

Whittington-Hill came of age during the '90s, a golden age of music and culture in general, noticing misogyny in the music industry firsthand. In *Girls Interrupted*, her experiences and observations are corroborated by studies and experts in the field, making her essays stronger and more enjoyable. She gets right to the point in the first pages, reporting on double standards in the industry and claiming that even if #MeToo and #TimesUp have given an "impression that things are better for women now," they are far from it. "This book exists to prove otherwise," she confidently states, as if declaring her essays as works of activism. And while they are all beautifully written and essential to read, the pieces have one flaw: they do not explore any new angle. We read them, agreeing with Whittington-Hill, who states well-documented facts but doesn't bring much new to the conversation.

Nonetheless, this doesn't lower the reporting or writing quality. *Girls Interrupted* is an excellent read for anyone interested in modern-day feminism and pop culture's shortcomings regarding women. While Whittington-Hill's penchant for the '90s grunge scene and Courtney Love – whom she mentions multiple times in the book – does take up a rather substantial part of the book, she still manages to write about modern pop culture events. One of her best essays, "Girls Gone Grift," explores the media obsession with female grifters. Taking the examples of Anna Sorokin (Anna Delvey) and Elizabeth Holmes, she dives deep into how these women were treated compared to male grifters, such as Fyre Festival founder Billy McFarland. According to Whittington-Hill, female grifters' stories are "stories about how we love to see women fail." She compares the lexicon used for men ("disruptors" instead of criminals) to the one used for women ("wannabe socialites"). The truth is that these are details that I was aware of but never paid great attention to – Whittington-Hill peels back the veil on subjects we subconsciously dismiss or file away as obvious and therefore not worth analyzing.

Whittington-Hill knows what she is talking about, but her best writing in this collection is when she shares her own experience. Suffering from Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, she opens up in "OCD is Not a Joke," describing her struggles with her rituals and how she finally felt accurately portrayed on television by shows like *Girls*, for example. Her emotions are easily conveyed to the reader, making her story more relatable and authentic. In this piece, the writer is at her finest. She makes us ask for more. She talks about this again in "Money Shots," but fails to achieve the same effect – despite infusing the piece with her thoughts, she doesn't bring anything new to the table. We already know where she's going: Yes, the media have described mental health negatively. Yes, women are again being treated badly by the press. While it is important to talk about these events, bringing new perspectives would have been appreciated.

In spite of my reservations, Whittington-Hill is a skilled culture writer and shows it in every page. While it lacks new perspectives on the subject, *Girls Interrupted* is an obligatory read for anyone who wants to make a career in culture. Because for culture to be a safe space, everyone needs to be treated equally. And, as Whittington-Hill repeatedly emphasizes, this is unfortunately far from being the case. mrb

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Devious Frames

Dark PR
How Corporate Disinformation Harms Our Health and the Environment
Grant Ennis
Daraja Press
$21.00, paper, 266pp
9781990263484

Grant Ennis' call for action on global health crises challenges perceived notions of corporate propaganda, government culpability, and political organization. *Dark PR* asks us to reconsider the public discourses we see on key issues such as global warming, obesity, and road deaths.

Ennis systematically reveals the ways in which corporations mislead, misdirect, and lie to protect their interests. He describes nine "devious frames," split into four different types of misdirection, that confuse and muddle debates on how to solve these crises. The solution is clear: end the government corporate subsidies that have caused these crises to flourish in the first place. What Ennis seeks to impress on readers is that these issues are structural and can therefore only be solved through structural means. While the text is dense with citations, its thorough research demonstrates how the unhealthy environments we live in are created through "corporate welfare."

Despite arguing that personalizing political action disarms it, Ennis often introduces the subchapters of this book with personal anecdotes from his long career. The anecdotes serve an important function of grounding Ennis' writing as the stakes of the book are made clear. These devious frames are material in the sense that they affect real-world events. The frustration felt in many of these passages serves as a clear motivation for such a direct call for action. It is not surprising that the book, which focuses on how global crises are framed by corporate interests and other parties, was written during the initial waves of COVID-19.

While corporations are repeatedly mentioned, Ennis does not shirk from critiquing the shared culpability of governments in enabling corporate lies. What is curious, though, is how the book ambiguously defines the relationship between the two. The reasons for why any government might enable or even begin the subsidies in the first place is never discussed. In fact, the book never once mentions capitalism as in any way enabling, facilitating, or even causing this toxic relationship. Despite tackling these various crises on a global level, the frame of cause-and-effect seems quite narrow. A reason for this omittance may be the intended audience of this book – namely, everyone. Ennis hopes that by making these devious frames visible and focusing on specific policy targets, "leftwing, centrist, and rightwing citizens might all agree" on the political action necessary.

The second half of the book is dedicated to discussing productive citizen activism, and the ways in which corporate propaganda obfuscates types of activism that are genuinely productive. Ennis is gentle but firm in discussing how even well-intentioned people unwillingly or unknowingly play into corporate interests. It is perhaps unsurprising that actions such as "conscious consumption" and keeping track of individual "carbon footprints" have little effect on the structures causing these crises. What will no doubt unsettle readers is instead the burgeoning evidence presented that argues the inefficiency of protests and charitable organizations. The last subchapter, however, is dedicated to discussing the organizing approaches that can lead to successful global action, with examples drawn from existing groups.

The tone of the latter half of the book is far from hopeless. Instead, the incensed writing builds towards a powerful call to action. The path to genuine political change is treacherous. The devious frames utilized by corporations to suppress activism often plays on individualism and consumerism. The only way forward is organized, collective, and policy-focused action. *Dark PR* swings between carefully researched yet devastating facts and determined aspirations for a healthier collaborative future. mrb

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